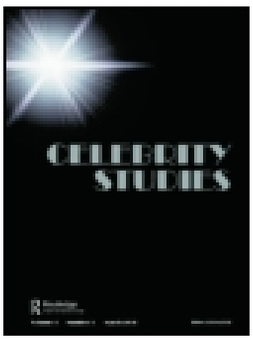

Celebrity Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcel20

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**To cite this article:** David Zeglen (2020): The cult of Russianicity: mobilising anti-fascist affect in Putin's Russia, Celebrity Studies, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2020.1800671

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1800671

Published online: 30 Jul 2020.

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CELEBRITY STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1800671

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# The cult of Russianicity: mobilising anti-fascist affect in Putin's Russia

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**ABSTRACT**

This article argues that after the Russian presidential election in 2012, the Kremlin mobilised a populist, anti-fascist affect called 'Russianicity' that Vladimir Putin used to help legitimate his third term as president. This article also traces how this state-led effort intertwined with the consumer commodity cult known as 'Putiniana' which functioned as an index of changing public sentiment towards Putin. Putin's cultivation of the ribbon of Saint George as a sign of victory against fascism during his first two terms is examined in conjunction with a Putiniana marked by an ambivalence about Russian national identity and economic prosperity. In the wake of economic decline, mass protests against Putin's third presidency, and the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, Russian state-controlled television manufactured a fascist threat from Ukraine intended to generate fear and panic. Subsequently, Putiniana more frequently invoked the ribbon of Saint George, which Putin leveraged to position himself as a unique leader capable of dealing with the fascist menace. This development culminated in Putin's annexation of the Crimean peninsula and consequently led to a new stage of Putiniana signifying the restoration of Russia back to geopolitical greatness.

**KEYWORDS**

Putin; Russia; celebrity; affect; spectacle

## Russia's new structure of feeling

For many Russians, the end of Vladimir Putin's term as prime minister in 2011 – preceded by two consecutive terms as president – and the coming parliamentary elections and 2012 presidential and state elections symbolised what would be a historic break from a solid decade of Putinism. This was not to be, as Putin announced in September 2011 that he would be running for a third term as president of Russia with Medvedev as his prime minister – a reversal of the tandem between Medvedev as president and Putin as prime minister established in 2008 in what Russians would come to call 'the castling'. Putin's announcement thus galvanised many urban middle-class Russians in the federal cities who had grown increasingly disillusioned with the Kremlin's system of managed democracy after the financial crisis, leading to the formation of a new structure of feeling geared towards undoing Putin's consolidation of power (Barry 2011). According to Raymond Williams (1977), a structure of feeling refers to the unconscious pre-emergence of new kinds of social relations, cultural forms, or institutions. For Williams, a structure of feeling

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has a futurity to it because it points to the shape of an emergent reality that is not fully known or understood yet. Thus, the potential for political change opens up when the experiences of the immediate present provoke the unconscious desires of a given social formation.

The first significant collective articulation of this structure of feeling occurred on 10 December 2011, when over 60,000 people converged onto Bolotnaya Square in central Moscow to protest the Duma's fraudulent parliamentary elections just one week prior. Widely reported to be the largest protest in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union, the demonstration called for an annulment of the election results, new and open elections, and the ability for a wide range of parties to register and participate in the next election (Batty 2015). As protests intensified in the months leading up to the presidential election in March, the movement adopted the symbol of a white ribbon. Reflecting the social make-up of the mostly urban, educated and liberal protestors, this sign was overdetermined with many affective states that centred on the political aspects of the regime and Putin himself including a civic populism of national solidarity against entrenched elites, elections based on possibility rather than a pre-ordinated outcome, and a sense of agency for Russian citizens. On 6 May, the day before Putin's inauguration into his third term as president, Russia's repressive state apparatuses descended on Bolotnaya Square, beating and arresting the protestors, inaugurating Putin's official clampdown on the White Ribbon Movement. In the following months, protestors would stage other gatherings only to suffer mass beatings and arrests. Concurrently, the Duma quickly passed punitive laws that restricted and then outright banned public protests throughout the country.

After the White Ribbon Movement had been snuffed out, it seemed that the protestors' structure of feeling had been put out with it. However, in November 2013, Russian-backed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union sparked what would become the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine. Although the motivations and background of Euromaidan are too complex to explain here, various protest movements erupted back in Russia in support of Euromaidan, again threatening the legitimacy of Putin's third term. Unable to risk political condemnation at home and abroad for a second wave of mass repression, Putin needed to rebrand his image to reconsolidate his legitimacy. This rebranding would require the mobilisation of an affective force that could successfully counter the White Ribbon. This contribution therefore examines the historical genealogy of a state-manufactured affect that, borrowing from Roland Barthes' theorisation of neologisms (1995, pp. 120–121), I will continually refer to as 'Russianicity'. I define Russianicity as a populist anti-fascist affect based on the threshold moment of WWII that amorphously alternates between valences of nostalgia, feelings of reliving history and a collective desire for the restoration of Russia as a great geopolitical power.

## Affect & celebrity politics in Russia

Since first being elected in 2000, the reproduction of Putin's status as an enigmatic celebrity politician has been analysed from a variety of perspectives, including his distinct machismo, family life, relationship with animals, associations with Christian orthodoxy and KGB weltanschauung (Dawisha 2014, Goscilo 2014, Sperling 2014). Yet, the role of affect has not been sufficiently considered, in part, due to celebrity studies' own general

neglect of affect's role in politics. While celebrity studies argue that the success of a politician depends on his or her ability to invoke feelings of desire, passion, charisma, inspiration and intimacy among the masses just as much as the actual policy positions that are advertised, emotion is not the same as affect, although they are often used synonymously with each other. For instance, in her work on celebrity politics, Liesbet van Zoonen (2005, pp. 63–65) conflates affect with emotion and draws upon neuroscience and affective subsystems of the brain to argue that individual emotions/affects are cognitive processes of rationalisation. But within cultural studies, affect has been strongly differentiated from emotion and cognition, and variously defined as pre-ideological, pre-cognitive, somatic, pre- and inter-individual, a force of encounter, non-dialectical and unmediated relatedness, as an excess of senses or experiences autonomous from and before linguistic meaning, an in-betweenness or state of relation, a potentiality of the body, and an uncontrollable circulating force (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). As these various definitions suggest, because of affect's specific encounters between bodies and contexts, there can never be a general theory or definition of affect to draw upon. Instead, each discrete moment or chain of seemingly unrelated and ephemeral moments that make up an affective instance requires an analysis that both methodologically follows the moments of its abrupt appearances and theoretically draws upon various arguments about how affect operates.

Therefore, unlike most analyses of celebrity politicians that focus on performance in the media, this contribution looks primarily at several related instances of how the Kremlin manufactured and deployed affect to help legitimate Putin's status as Russia's leader, and how Putin's cult of commodities described below functioned as a register for public sentiment in conjunction with his media performances from 2000 to 2015. While affect does not, by itself, drive all social tendencies in Russia, nor is mobilising affect the only significant element in the Kremlin's overall strategy, it nonetheless played an important role in legitimating Putin's political status. Furthermore, although Putin is often referred to as a celebrity (Goscilo and Strukov 2011, Goscilo 2013), I argue that he more closely embodies a cult of personality. As John Street and Maja Šimunjak (2016, p. 453) elaborate, the contemporary personalisation of politics has at least two broad dimensions: (1) the emphasis on one's private social relations and personal history or background; and (2) one's personal qualities that they embody as an individual. While both tendencies are often present in modern politicians, celebrity is more focused on the first characteristic, while the cult of personality is predominant in the second. As Tatiana Mikhailova (2013) has observed, commentary about Putin in the media is notably absent in details about his family background and personal relationships with others, while excessive about emphasising his distinct personal abilities, skills, and traits. Putin is only a celebrity in the sense of being an 'absolute' celebrity – a category Debord (2010, pp. 64–65) developed to link the cult of personality to the circulation of capitalist commodity signs. Therefore, I will use, and elaborate on, Debord's definition of celebrity below.

This analysis of Putin as celebrity via Russianicity proceeds as follows: first, I examine how Putin cultivated Russia's threshold moment in history by distributing the ribbon of Saint George as a sign of victory against fascism during his first two terms as president. Second, Putin's cult of commodities is analysed to reveal an ambivalence about Russian national identity that relies on economic prosperity. Third, once economic prosperity collapsed, I argue that Putin mobilised Russianicity by using the Kremlin's televisual apparatuses to

manufacture a fascist threat and consequently generate fear and panic in the wake of Euromaidan. Finally, I will look at how Putin's cult of commodities took on a new valence in response to the Kremlin's mobilisation of Russianicity. This new valence, involving the ribbon of Saint George, involved a re-feeling of the threshold moment, which Putin leveraged to position himself as a unique leader capable of dealing with the fascist menace and restoring Russia back to geopolitical greatness. I conclude by evaluating Putin's challenges once the campaign to mobilise Russianicity ended.

## The sign of Russia's threshold moment

As the white ribbon demonstrated during the Bolotnaya protests, social responses to a crisis can manifest in a sign that contains a 'non-discursive' or 'third' meaning beyond the symbolic (Guattari 1995, pp. 1–31, Barthes 1985, p. 55) which carry intensities, potentialities, and textures as they resonate through bodies. However, signs can also be affectively mobilised to block such feelings. Indeed, affective counterforces partially explain why individuals experience the same structure of feeling at relatively different moments of delay and first perceive such feelings as internal and personal, rather than social. As Brian Massumi (2010) argues, a 'performance takes place wholly between the sign and the "instinctively" activated body whose feeling is "broken" by the sign's command to transition to a new feeling' (p. 64). If a structure of feeling does avoid any affective counterforces and permeate through the social body, only then might a new structure of feeling be theorised into discourse and come to take on new emergent tendency. No doubt many structures of feeling have been strangled in the crib by state regimes that articulate a sign with specific affective states through repetition and circulation throughout the social formation (Ioanide 2015, p. 15).

However, the sign circulated to block a given structure of feeling must be rooted in a powerful and historical affect already embedded in a social formation. For Massumi (2010, p. 62), the most powerful signs that regimes of power use often draw upon what he calls, 'threshold moments', or traumatic events in a country's history that the state cultivates over time to frame all other past and future events. Indeed, since taking power as President of Russia in 2000, Vladimir Putin has continued to bolster the pageantry and pomp of the country's annual celebrations of Victory Day, the national holiday marking Nazi Germany's capitulation to the Soviet Union at the end of the WWII. As part of these celebrations, Stalin has been deracinated from his Soviet legacy and is now narrowly associated with a distinctly Russian victory over fascism . Putin has carefully contributed to this discourse with statements that suggest the necessity of brute force in achieving victory. For instance, in 2014, at a Youth Forum on Lake Seliger, Putin said to his audience, that '[Russians] can criticize the commanders and Stalin all we like, but can anyone say with certainty that a different approach would have enabled us to win?' (Luhn 2016b). Under Putin, the Ministry of Education also revised the nation's secondary school textbooks and launched several memory workshops to interpellate children into feeling pride for Russian victories attained during WWII (Liñán 2010). Valerie Sperling (2009, p. 238) points out that surveys of Russian youth under Putin have consistently demonstrated that there is a widely held belief that Stalin's leadership was vital in defending the Russian people and defeating the Nazis in WWII.

The possible motivations for Putin's construction of Russia's threshold moment based on victory over the Nazis are numerous. As Cassiday and Johnson (2010, pp. 695–697) argue, Putin was responding to 'a larger cultural trend of stylized expressions of nostalgia for the Soviet past that have flourished in Russia since the Soviet Union's demise'. Indeed, the rehabilitation of Stalin deeply resonated with the older generations who nostalgically longed for a return to *silnaya ruka* (the iron fist of centralised power). Furthermore, Putin's framing of Russian victory during WWII as Russia's threshold moment provided a base for a post-Soviet Russian national identity in contrast to Yeltsin's failed reforms to unify Russians after the country lost its superpower status. But Russia's threshold moment also contained an affective potential that could be mobilised in times of crisis. Commenting on the mass display of Soviet symbols during Victory Day celebrations in Russia, E.A. Wood (2011) argues that such icons are powerful because they are 'perceived visually and through affect rather than reason. Putin's Kremlin planners do not have to create a new ideology because "everyone knows" that the nation is sacred in its suffering and rebirth, in its role as saviour of Europe from the evils of the barbarian Nazis' (p. 175). Wood's comment suggests that this 'common sense' is a somatic, rather than cognitive, phenomenon that taps into a broad sense of Russian identity. As Gregory and Alexander Guroff (1994, p. 87) point out, Russians today continue to feel the righteousness of their victory over fascism, and Putin could easily exploit these feelings to help legitimise his rule in the event that a new structure of feeling emerged that threatened his power.

Yet many younger Russians remain ambivalent about Putin's rehabilitation of Russia's WWII conquest over fascism (Vujačić 2010, p. 49). Soviet icons like the sickle and hammer and the red star fail to resonate with young Russians who have a critical distance from or no memory of Stalinism, while the flag of the Russian federation is too far removed from WWII to be put to affective work. Without such a unifying symbol, Putin would find it difficult to make a broad appeal to Russians. However, the Kremlin's anti-fascist youth organisation, Nashi, solved this dilemma in early May of 2005. In anticipation of Victory Day on 9 May, Nashi's volunteers spent several days handing out thousands of ribbons with three black and two orange stripes to Russians walking on the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other major cities throughout the country. Sure enough, on Victory Day, many people could be spotted throughout the celebration wearing the orange and black ribbon. Ingeniously, Nashi had mobilised the ribbon of Saint George (hereafter RSG), an icon unassimilable to strictly Soviet iconography due to its ubiquity as a component of military medals throughout Russian history, including WWII. Since Catherine the Great's establishment of the Order of Saint George in 1769, the RSG has been frequently used by the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation as a component of the state's highest military decorations. Lacking an exclusively identifiable association with a particular version of the Russian state while remaining associated with Russian participation in WWII, the RSG also became associated with a broad imaginary of geopolitical greatness that extended forwards and backwards in time. Furthermore, Saint George figured not only as a knight that personified civilisation against external enemies, he was also a saint that endured continual torture and resurrection which allegorically reinforced a sense of eternal suffering and endurance of the Russian people. Thus, since 2005, every year before Victory Day on 9 May, millions of ribbons are distributed and worn throughout Russia with mottoes including 'the victory of my grandfather is my victory', and 'we're the heirs of the Great Victory' (RT 2009). The RSG circulation during Victory Day

suggests that a variety of feelings such as morale, resilience, anguish, suffering, solidarity, triumph, and anti-fascist patriotism were enduring features of the Russian body, which could be transferred from generation to generation.

## Putin's commodity cult

While Putin was constructing Russia's threshold moment, an unusual phenomenon simultaneously emerged in the Russian consumer commodity market in what Helena Goscilo (2011) calls 'Putiniana' – a proliferating brand of products including t-shirts, postcards, keychains, calendars, birthday cards, chocolates, office supplies, coins, and so on, all adorning Putin's image (Roberts 2016). For Goscilo (2013, p. 13), the rise of Putiniana represented a market-driven response to the improvement of the average Russian's quality of life and sense of security, and 'a sign of solidarity with [Putin's] ambitious vision for the nation as a global power'. Given that from 2000–2008, Putin presided over an immense economic boom, largely due to a rise in global oil prices (Remington 2012), Goscilo is surely right to suggest that this rise in living standards is perceived to be the direct result of Putin's power. Alternatively, as Cassiday and Johnson (2013, pp. 50–51) suggest, it is possible to read Putiniania through the lens of Sergei Oushakine's (2007) notion of post-Soviet aphasia. Due to the uncertain definition of post-Soviet Russian national society, Oushakine argues that the country is beholden to the symbolic framework of the Soviet Union, which leads to a nostalgic retrofitting onto cultural forms. Thus, Putiniana is a revival of the Soviet cult of personality that reinforces feelings for *silnaya ruka*.

Goscilo and Oushakine's respective theories elucidate a tension inherent in Putiniana. While many Russians enjoyed a rise in living standards due to the oil and gas boom, there was also a deep ambivalence about what this meant for Russian nationalism. As Peter Rutland (2015) argues, unlike other petro-states, Russians are reluctant to incorporate being an oil and gas economy into their Russian identity. While they acknowledge that Russia is an energy superpower, as Rutland (2015 , p. 76) points out, they are also deeply sympathetic to the old Communist slogan that Russia should not be a raw material appendage of the West. As a destination for foreign commodity exports in exchange for the country's natural resources – the epitome of a state on the periphery of the capitalist world system – Putiniana can be read as a way for Russian consumers to negotiate an ambivalence about their national identity by indigenising commodities with Putin's face – an image that signifies a series of traits, such as strength, power, and authority, that have been established via media representations of his judo prowess, stern demeanour, mastery of nature, and tireless efforts to make Russia great again. As Valerie Sperling (2014, p. 76) argues, Putin's state-driven cult of personality during his first two terms as president and single term as prime minister, focused on being tough, virile, sober, and decisive to contrast from the boozy embarrassment of the Yeltsin years where Russia lost its super-power status, and emergent capitalism resulted in mass poverty and a loss in pride.

This unusual cult of commodities based on a combination of Goscilo and Oushakine's theories of Putiniana embodies Debord's (1998, pp. 8–11) notion of the integrated spectacle. For Debord (2010, p. 60) the integrated spectacle is a hybrid of the diffuse spectacle of the free market and the identification with a variety of celebrity lifestyles, and the concentrated spectacle of limited markets and identification with a single leader. The

integrated spectacle involves the proliferation of commodities in the free market but also contains mechanisms of surveillance and coercion along with the support of a single leader. Thus, in Debordian terms, Putin is an exemplar of an integrated celebrity. Indeed, Putin's status as integrated celebrity suggests that if the commodity cult that had successfully papered over post-Soviet Russian nationalism's inherent tensions was to be threatened by the economic crisis and mass protest, Putin would have to resort to using his state apparatuses to re-assert his legitimacy via an alternative, and more affectively charged, imagining of the nation. Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising provided Putin with the right historical opportunity to mobilise Russianicity and thereby re-legitimise his power.

## Weapons of mass communication

Although the Russian government's immediate response to the Ukrainian Revolution in the fall of 2013 described the protestors as thugs, outside agitators, and miscreants (Stern 2013), as the revolution intensified, the Kremlin refined its state discourse significantly, indicating the direction of its media offensive. For instance, in February, the Russian Foreign Ministry denounced the uprising by comparing it to the Nazis' rise to power in the 1930s (Myers 2014), while in March 2014, during a speech to the Federal Assembly, President Putin denounced the Ukrainian protestors as fascists, anti-Semites, and Nazis (Kelley 2015). While Russia under Putin's previous administrations experienced a variety of foreign policy crises, including 9/11, the 2004 Orange Revolution, and repeated acts of Chechen terrorism, the Kremlin has generally (although not always) avoided comparing these events with the rise of fascism despite repeated calls from Russia's hard-right to do so (Tsygankov 2009). It is possible that Putin did not want to use such an analogy unless it was necessary to do so and/or had a degree of plausibility to it. Euromaidan had several far-right nationalist groups participating, even though they only ever constituted a small segment of the overall social movement, which was predominately made up of socialists, anarchists, left student movements, and anti-corruption activists. Nevertheless, the Kremlin leveraged the presence of these far-right groups to help re-assert Putin's authority. Although historical analogies are often used discursively to frame and rationalise policy decisions to the public, they can also trigger pre-conscious affective associations that help recruit support for political leaders (Noon 2004, p. 340).

But the Kremlin also needed to mobilise the visual to make the discourse they were spinning more affectively concrete to the public. At first, colourful propaganda posters, billboards, and leaflets distributed throughout the country continued to invoke the WWII analogy (Kelley 2014). However, it was television that Putin most relied on to make more provocative comparisons. For instance, on 1 March 2014, Channel One Russia reported that over one hundred and forty thousand Ukrainian refugees were attempting to cross into Russia due to the instability back in Ukraine. As confirmation, the channel showed a long line of cars lining up near what the television reporter called the Ukraine–Russia border (Russia Channel One 2014). Despite the fact that the immigration building sign in the image read as the Ukrainian-Polish border, the reporter emphasised that the worsening political situation in Ukraine was forcing Ukrainians to leave the country for Russia, invoking the Ukrainian refugee crisis provoked by the Nazi invasion in 1941. In April, Russia-1, Channel One's 'competitor', aired a segment showing a construction site in eastern Ukraine. According to TV host Arkady Mamontov, the television camera 'clearly showed' that what was being built were a series of

concentration camps for Russians who defied Ukrainian 'fascists'. Although the buildings had been under construction for several years as part of an EU-funded project to temporarily house undocumented migrants, the report followed a Russian Foreign Ministry statement expressing extreme anxiety over the construction of buildings identical to Nazi concentration camps (Kates 2015). And on 2 May, Russia-1, Channel One, and NTV replayed footage of a burning building in Odessa where dozens of pro-Russian protestors had died. The Russian television reporters labelled the fire 'Odessa Khatyn', (BBC 2015) a conflation of the 1941 Odessa Massacre where Nazis executed tens of thousands of Jews by burning them alive and the Khatyn Massacre of 1943, where Nazis burned down the village of Khatyn. Despite the fact that no Jews were involved and that pro-Russian protestors caused the fire due to a petrol bomb malfunction, Russian television stations continued to circulate the footage with the label for weeks, even running special exposes accompanying the footage on the rising threat of Ukrainian pogroms targeting Russians (Bryttan 2014).

As Stuart Hall (2007) argues, the televisual sign immediately resonates with viewers in ways that other media do not since, quoting Charles Sanders Pierce, it 'possesses some of the properties of the thing it represent[s]' (p. 95). As Hall elaborates, this is because visual signs in television have been naturalised as being more readily iconic through cultural habituation. Thomas Mathiesen (1997, p. 230) also points out that television programming can be very redundant. As a consequence, programming disciplines our consciousness over time through the total aggregate of discourse, rather than through an individual iteration, to present a *Gestalt*, or 'world paradigm' to the public. But in its Russian context, television also provided an ideal vehicle to affectively legitimate the Putin regime's analogy. As several scholars (Oates 2006, Mickiewicz 2008, Burrett 2011) point out, since a large majority of Russians use television over all other media as their main source for their news, Putin spent the past decade consolidating Russia's television networks under his control. As of 2018, this trend had not declined significantly, even with the advent of the Internet (Moscow Times 2019). In fact, Russians generally distrust news from the Internet, preferring television news for their ideological signposts, although this is changing gradually (Eurasianet 2019). However, contra Mathiesen, discipline through media discourse does not always produce the proper subject. As Anderson (2010, p. 181) argues, catastrophic techniques of threat and disaster, in this case, based on recognisable affective televisual signs such as camps, refugees, and anti-Semitic pogroms, must be deployed to the population to generate the necessary response. Indeed, dozens of WWII documentaries airing during Victory Day since 2005 (Finney 2011, p. 2) helped to naturalise the highly affective televisual signs used in Putin's television campaign during the Ukrainian Revolution. Rather than creating just a consciousness industry, the Russian state media utilised a historical analogy to generate a schema pre-packaged with affective connotations based on the threshold moment. As the above examples demonstrate, it was not important that the empirical facts of the images were grossly ignored. What mattered was that they created what Massumi (2010, pp. 53–54) calls 'affective facts'; facts legitimated through embodied responses rather than evidence. Furthermore, while affective facts are based on the possibility of a vague future threat, the Russia media's coverage of the Ukrainian Revolution was based on the perception of an actual materialisation of a specified and familiar terror occurring right before the Russian public's eyes. Thus, the historical analogy 'felt right' to the public because of its affective recognisability via the indexical pretensions of a news documentary. Interestingly, the Putiniana in the consumer commodity market morphed into a new phenomenon, thereby signalling Putin's media strategy made some impact on the public.

## The cult of Russianicity

During the Kremlin's television campaign offensive, the RSG also re-appeared, albeit as a decoration accompanying a variety of Russian consumer commodities, much like the Putin-brand commodities that had appeared during his first two terms. The RSG could now be bought every time Russian consumers purchased vodka, milk, dress shirts, confections, or essentially any food product, while RSG orange and black colour motifs also appeared on a wide range of commodities, including sushi rolls, IKEA furniture, sandals, ties, public restrooms, shoelaces, hair highlights, restaurant bills, canine grooming and plastic packaging (Weird Russia 2016). But unlike the previous resuscitation of the RSG for Victory Day, this iteration did not exclusively focus on the remembrance of past victory. Instead, the distribution of the ribbon in 2014 imbued Russianicity into the routines of Russians' everyday lives as citizen-soldiers vigilant against oncoming fascists. As Ben Anderson (2010, p. 181) argues, the logistics of affective schemas also require providential power – the provision of relief and/or security from the disaster instigated by catastrophic power. One of the ways that providential power can provide relief is through the circulation of affective codes that distinguish inside from outside. As the Russian media provoked the historical fears of its citizens, the people simultaneously resurrected the RSG with a ribbon campaign that demarcated Russians from everybody else (i.e. Ukrainian fascists). While this practice of demarcation is reminiscent of the enduring 'svoi vs. chuzhoi' (loosely, our own kind versus the stranger or foreigner) populist trope in Russian culture, this iteration (i.e. Russianicity) is specifically refracted through the threshold moment. Although it is doubtful that Russianicity mobilised large swathes of the Russian public into action, it did likely contribute to the emergence of several anti-fascist militias who began sporting the RSG as armbands within Russia. Once formed, these anti-fascist militias ambushed several war museums in eastern Ukraine, stealing Soviet WWII-era weapons, uniforms, and even tanks in the process (Shandra 2015). According to one militia leader, the items stolen were necessary to defeat the fascists, because 'this was the stuff our ancestors beat the Nazis with' (Blake 2014). In effect, this was an affective re-living of the threshold moment in Russian history to create victory itself.

Thus, Russianicity evolved into a feeling more complicated than nostalgia. As Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004) note, 'nostalgia emphasizes the irretrievability of the past as the very condition of desire' and 'is never longing for a specific past as much as it is longing for longing itself, made all the safer by the fact that the object of that desire is deemed irrevocably lost' (p. 491). But for these anti-fascist militias, Russianicity involved a bodily sensation of re-living the past. Indeed, what occurred was the wholesale replacement of irreversible time with cyclical time (Debord 2010, pp. 125–146), as discrete historical events became infinitely exchangeable with one another, equal in affect-value. As Debord (2010) argues, those caught in cyclical time return to familiar objects and similar places to confirm the 'pure return of time … the repetition of a sequence of activities' (p. 127). Indeed, several anti-fascist militias, such as the Luhansk People's Republic militia and the Donetsk People's militia, expanded their campaign into eastern Ukraine. Consequently, affective facts based on camps, refugees, and pogroms that Russian television had previously advertised as catastrophic power became actual facts in Ukraine. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, more than 800,000

people fled Ukraine due to the unrest created by the militias (EuroNews 2015), anti-semitism increased significantly (Kupfer 2015), and Amnesty International (2014) reported that the militias were responsible for hundreds of instances of inhumane detentions and tortures. As Tamás (2016) notes, 'there's no telling apart the Russian army and the pro-Russian irregulars in the present conflict in Ukraine. This is not merely a trick: the Russian-speaking ethnic minority in East Ukraine in the eyes of everybody in the area is classified as Russian: ethnicity is all, nationality is nothing. Ethnic cleansing is a logical outcome' (p. 130). This bizarre shift from affective to actual fact encapsulates Massumi's logic of pre-emption (2010, p. 56), as action to prevent the things seen as threats produces the very things it was concerned with taking action against in the first place, thus reproducing history.

Furthermore, the re-living of history also moved people, if not into the streets, then into demanding a great statesman lead them in the fight against fascism (Shestopal 2015, p. 274). Before moving into his third term, Putin had already constructed an image of himself via his annual 'Direct Line with the President' television special as the only leader capable of leading the Russian people against any external military threats that might arise, just on different grounds. In light of the fascist threat, various television talk shows depicted apocalyptic scenarios of what would have happened if Putin was not re-elected, while the Kremlin's campaign to annexe Ukraine's Crimea was framed as a purely defensive move to protect Russians from fascism (Leonor and Shandra 2016). Certainly, annexing Crimea provided Putin with a unique opportunity to mobilise Russianicity into a larger project for legitimating his power by restoring Russia to its former glory as a vast empire. To consecrate this idea, Putin hosted the 2014 Victory Day celebration in the Crimean capital of Sevastopol after the successful referendum annexation. Speaking at the event with throngs of Russians adorning the RSG, Putin channelled the affect-value of living cyclical time, speaking not in remembrance of the past victory, but the victory that had just been won over the fascists again, albeit with a nationalist tinge: for Putin, seizing Crimea was about the return of Russians to Russia, and 'this means we have become even stronger, and I congratulate you on the great victory' (Smith-Spark *et al*. 2014). With the public already mobilised against fascism, Taras Kuzio (2016, p. 90) points out that

> Putin expanded these links further by stating the Russian motherland had a right and duty over and above international law and existing treaties with Ukraine to protect ethnic Russians and Russophones in the Crimea against 'fascists' brought to power by a Western conspiracy. This was placed within the age-old Russian yearning for the re-gathering and reuniting of historic Russkii (ethnic Russian) lands; with Ukrainians and Belarusians branches of the Russian nation.

Kuzio (2016, p. 90) elaborates on how Putin's claim of Crimea as Russian territory also expanded to laying claim to ancient history by alleging that Vladimir the Great, grand prince of the mighty Kievan realm [882–1240 A.D.], was baptised in the peninsula and then subsequently baptised the Rus' people into Christianity. Although this issue manipulates history to frame Ukraine as ethnically Russian, it also functions to legitimise the return of a historical form of rule associated with the past. In a speech at the Kremlin palace in 2015 remembering Vladimir the Great, Putin gave a paean to the medieval ruler: 'by halting internecine strife, by defeating external enemies, Prince Vladimir laid the foundation for the formation of a united Russian nation; in fact, he cleared the way for

the establishment of a strong, centralized Russian state' (Nechepurenko 2015). Putin's statement engendered a prefigurative politics for his regime by glorifying what previously made Russia great – a strong, decisive leader. However, this continued to be refracted through the lens of a Russianicity posited against fascism as evidenced by the post-annexation hagiography of commodities.

After Crimea was integrated into Russia as its own federal state, consumer commodities adorning Putin's face became increasingly more prevalent again, albeit with a variety of motifs that had not been seen in the previous period of Putiniana (Luhn 2016a). Putin now appeared either with the background colours of the RSG (The Conversation 2014), with Stalin and the RSG (Shevchenko 2015), or with Stalin and former tsar Alexander III along with the RSG colours (Moscow Times 2016). While media discourse in Western Europe and the United States reinforced the perception of Putin as a modern incarnation of Stalin and an inheritor to the long linage of Russia's autocratic tsars (Mason 2014), this denunciatory tactic only reinforced an image Putin had already longed to cultivate and circulate among his people. In a process which Massumi (2002) calls the trans-situational dimensions of affect, the new Putin commodities invoked Russianicity to generate an affective chain of equivalence from the image of the rehabilitated Stalin as well as former tsars, to the third-term president Putin, and visually solidified how a populist demand for a strong leader to fight against outsiders had been received, implemented, and coronated. Thus under Putin's third term, the reappearance of Putiniana after the Crimean annexation signified the legitimation of a contemporary leader uniquely suited to ruling a great geopolitical power in absolute terms.

## No more Crimeas left

After his third re-election, Putin's status as an integrated celebrity appeared to have insulated him from the ongoing Russian recession, as his approval ratings remained high and Putin-brand commodities continued to sell in the market. Commenting on the power of affective mobilisation in Russia, Jane Lezina (Ormiston 2016) notes that in the aftermath of the Crimean annexation 'people have got an impression, or an illusion, that Russia has returned to its great-power status, that Russia's greatness, lost with the collapse of the U.S.S.R., has suddenly revived … It is likely their consolidation around the leader will survive for some time, at least'.

However, such prognostications were highly optimistic, even if Putin's approval ratings at the time were authentic. Due to the historical and geopolitical confluences that positioned Crimea as a unique chance for Putin to deploy Russianicity and invoke a restoration of great geopolitical status to Russia, there are no clear political opportunities like Crimea left to exploit that could help conceal Russia's economic problems and national identity crisis. As a result, there has been a notable recession in geopolitical greatness rhetoric since the annexation. Instead, Russian television networks have made several attempts to present a post-Soviet state nationalism that could unify the country. For instance, 'President: 15 Years On' – one of the latest Kremlin-produced television documentaries biographizing Putin's career – put forwards a vision for a new Russian nationalism that weld several contradictory elements together into a vague notion of the historical continuity of the Russian state, including Russian Christian orthodoxy, the patriotism of the military discipline of the Stalin period, the absolutist rule of the feudal

period via a re-evaluation of the White Army and White intellectuals, and national sovereignty realised through the virtues of industry development and protectionism. Putin also revealed his cautiousness about imposing a model of state nationalism onto the Russian polity, as evidenced by his request in November 2016 that the Duma pass legislation on defining the 'Russian nation'. Additionally, since the Crimean annexation, many Russians have been increasingly drawn to the Russian Communist Party or opposition leader Alexi Navalny's Progress Party, the latter of which has mobilised several major street protests across Russia that surpassed the scale and depth of the Bolotnaya protests from several years prior. As the post-Crimea euphoria has petered out and Russia's internal social problems remain unaddressed, Putin's approval ratings have levelled back down to pre-Crimea numbers (Stanovaya 2018). While Putin gestured towards alleviating some socio-economic issues in his annual address to Russia's Federal Assembly in late February of 2019, it remains unclear whether he will fully follow through on these promises, and how the Kremlin's affective state apparatuses can be used to mobilise the public and re-legitimise president Putin again. Consequently, his fourth term continues to be roiled by new structures of feeling that will require Putin to again attempt to justify his own regime to the public, albeit within a narrower range of available options.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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